

Art in America

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Laurie Fendrich

By Leah Ollman



Sense and Sensation: Laurie Fendrich, *Paintings and Drawings 1990-2010*,” the artist’s first retrospective, spanned two decades of a 30-year career, with the greatest emphasis on work made since 2005—her jauntiest, most complex and absorbing ever. Fendrich’s

vocabulary of flat, interlocking, primarily angular shapes has remained fairly consistent, broadening over time to encompass more figurative suggestions, a greater range of scale among the parts and a more sensuous touch.

As the exhibition title indicates through its allusion to Jane Austen (one of the artist’s touchstones), Fendrich seeks a balance between presumed opposites: intellect and emotion, freedom and limitation, harmonic stasis and frisky dynamism. Her work hums with friction. Forms in the early paintings are firmly locked in place, and in spite of a bold palette, an air of sobriety prevails. After around 2000, her work breathes more confidently and laughs more freely. Quivering, luminous edges in contrasting or complementary hues soften the otherwise crisp shapes, notes of conditionality tempering the absolute. While maintaining an overall sense of control and order (as well as a modest scale, most paintings measuring less than 3 feet on a side),

Fendrich has become more playful—rambunctious, even. Her sense of humor emerges in titles like *Uh-Oh* and *Time Wounds All Heels*, in the rakish tilt assumed by the agglomerations of forms and in the forms themselves: bulges that protrude like cartoon ears or bulbous clown’s noses, and speech bubble-type shapes that hover like spaces for potential punch lines.

Fendrich has assimilated the planar frontality of Synthetic Cubism and the collagelike organization of shallow space in paintings by Picasso, Gris and Stuart Davis, as well as a headier abstraction rooted in Kandinsky. She generates energy and rhythm in her work through a carnivalesque approach to color, exuberant but finely tuned. Her canvases pack a panoply of hues: neon orange, russet, marshmallow, blue-black, persimmon, lavender, hot pink, pale pink, brick, blood, candy apple and periwinkle.

The artist’s Conté crayon drawings on toothy paper (dating mostly from the past decade), smaller in size than the canvases and limited to velvety black, untouched white and a spectrum of grays, are texturally rich and buzz with vibrancy. Akin to the paintings in their puzzlelike construction and sense of contained commotion, the drawings likewise have an innate musicality, a bounce. At times, they turn refreshingly goofy, their simple shapes animated into playful characters with hockey-stick legs and tipping hats. Fendrich’s drawn and painted works have the appeal of sophisticated ditties—smart, charming and not excessively self-important.

Photo: Laurie Fendrich: A Frame Around the Dog, 2006, oil on canvas, 36 by 34 inches; at Scripps College.